

## Earth-Friendly Gardening & Landscaping

# The GreenMan



## Chrysanthemums: Jewels of the fall garden

Autumn light is mellow, warm and golden, and almost seems to glow across our landscape. Gardeners, looking to respond to that gentle light, will find no plant which can echo the gentle colors of fall more kindly and completely than the chrysanthemum.

The chrysanthemum is often called the "queen of fall flowers," and is actually the largest commercially produced flower in the United States, both as a potted plant, and in floral arrangements, where chrysanthemums are valued as one of the longest lasting cut flowers.

Mums are members of the *Asteraceae* (or *Compositae*) family, the largest family of flowering plants, and are related to asters, dahlias, marigolds, zinnias, and most other daisy-like flowers.

A closer look at a plant will reveal that the single bloom is actually made up or "composed" (hence *Compositae*) of hundreds of small flowers or florets, with ray florets on the outer edge of the flower, and disk florets at the center of the blossom.

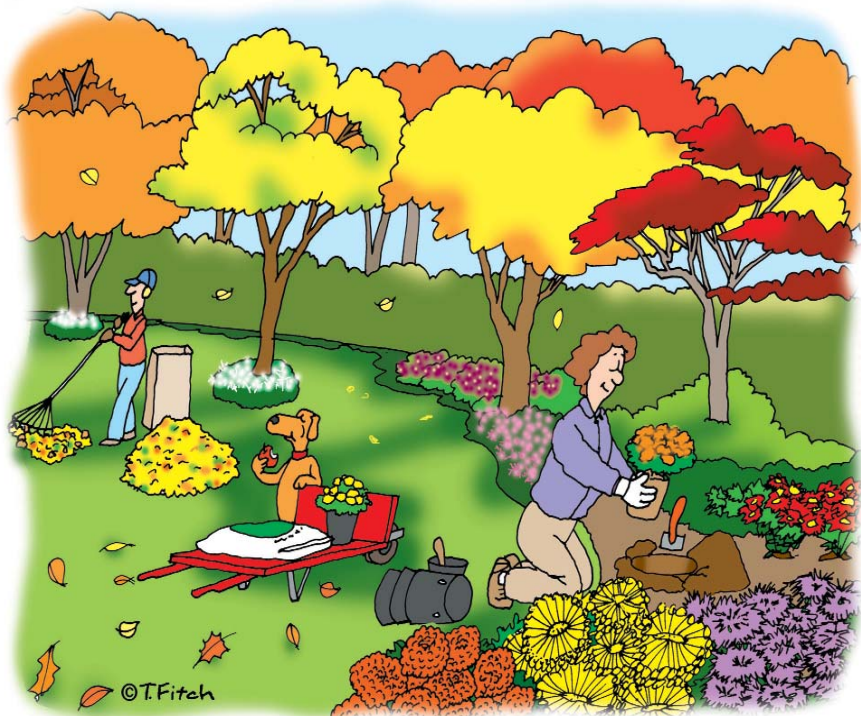
The origins of the mum take us to China, at least as far back as the 15th century B.C., where the plant was cultivated as a flowering herb for use in salads, brewing beverages for special celebrations, and curing headaches, possibly caused by those celebrations.

Please note that only the flower petals of today's ornamental mums are edible. While there is an edible chrysanthemum called garland or vegetable chrysanthemum (*Chrysanthemum coronarium*), with leaves reminiscent of today's ornamental variety, hungry gardeners should not attempt to eat the foliage of garden chrysanthemums. During the eighth century A.D., chrysanthemums began to appear in the literature and art of Japan. Called *Ki-Ku*, "Queen of the East," a single blossom of the flower was

used as the crest of the emperor, and Chryanthemum Throne is the common name for the Imperial Throne. Today, chrysanthemum is the national flower of Japan.

Chrysanthemums gained attention in the West in the 17th century, and were so-named by the botanist Linnaeus who combined the Greek "*chrysos*" with "*anthemon*" to describe a "golden flower." Of course, mums are a lot more than golden flowers these days.

Horticultural breeding now provides a dizzying variety of forms, col-



ors, and growth habitats. The National Chrysanthemum Society recognizes 13 different classes of mum, many of which are familiar to gardeners, such as spider, anemone, quill, spoon, and pompon, although marketing efforts also tout mums with fanciful names such as football mums, maxi-mums, pin cushion, and many more.

Beyond interesting floral shapes, these jewels of autumn are resplendent in russets and gold, red, yellow, gold, orange, pink, purple, and white, and can be planted in solid masses of color, or mixed together like a living tapestry.

Of special interest is a fairly recent and popular mum, 'Silver and Gold,' which provides variegated foliage along with attractive blooms and desirable winter hardiness.

Chrysanthemums can be sited almost anywhere in the landscape, in planters by a front door, as border plantings along a driveway, or mixed into a year-round garden bed to provide a quiet splash of color. Planted in beds around and beneath trees, the colors you select can mirror or complement the seasonal color of the leaves overhead. Above all, the mums can provide a dramatic climax for your landscape before the arrival of winter.

However, before you run off to your local supermarket to pick up your bounty of mums, you should consider a few important details. Most important of all, be sure to select hardy garden mums, not the foil-wrapped, potted florist mums. The mums commonly given as housewarming gifts are probably not

winter hardy, and also tend to become quite tall, and will provide few blooms beyond the care and feeding of a greenhouse manager.

Instead, turn to a reputable garden center, where the mums are already somewhat acclimated to cooler temperatures, and where the plants were initially bred for use as perennials. Seek advice from a staff horticulturist if you are uncertain about your selection.

You will want to ensure that your mums receive about six hours of sun, and should be planted in organically-rich, well-drained soil. Consider improving your soil by adding compost, and prepare the planting bed eight to 12 inches deep.

After planting, water the mums thoroughly and water weekly thereafter, carefully avoiding wetting the foliage, which can cause mildew. After the flowers have faded, snip off spent blooms and mulch the bed with shredded leaves or shredded hardwood mulch about three inches thick.

Keep in mind that there may be some losses if the winter months are especially harsh. Generally, spring-planted mums have a better survival rate than those planted in fall, but proper care can make a significant difference.

In early spring, pull back the mulch to allow new shoots to emerge and prune back old stems to the ground. After plants start growing fully, pinch back about four inches of growth every three to four weeks until July to encourage bushy growth, a full head of flowers, and an autumnal blooming period.

Every other spring, starting in about two years, divide your mums by digging up the entire plant, then use a sharp knife to separate well-rooted outer pieces from the original plant. Space out and replant the new pieces, and send the old woody core to the compost pile.

Interestingly, you will find that chrysanthemums seldom receive the recognition they deserve. For example, Preakness fans think they are seeing the winning horse and rider presented with a blanket of Black-eyed susans. Not so! Those flowers are actually mums, substituted for the summer-blooming Maryland state flower.

A rose by any other name? You will also find that there are few roses adorning those colorful floats in the Rose Bowl Parade in Pasadena. Instead, delighted viewers are enjoying a kaleidoscope of mum blossoms and petals. But mums the word on that!

For more information on growing and appreciating mums, turn to the National Chrysanthemum Society and their website: [www.mums.org](http://www.mums.org). Locally, mum fanciers can become involved with either of two groups: the Potomac Chrysanthemum Society, which meets on the third Wednesday of each month at Wheaton Regional Library; call Carol Cunnick at 301.294.9473; email [cccunnick@hotmail.com](mailto:cccunnick@hotmail.com). Or consider the Chesapeake Chrysanthemum Society, which meets the first Monday of each month at Clarksville Middle School; contact Martha Best at 301.498.1329; email [mandmbest@comcast.net](mailto:mandmbest@comcast.net).



The GreenMan Show is produced for County Cable Montgomery by the Department of Environmental Protection (DEP) and the Office of Public Information. It airs daily on Cable Channel 6 and can also be

viewed on the Internet. For a complete schedule and online access, visit [www.greenmanshow.com](http://www.greenmanshow.com).

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